

H for Hope

The Prognosis for Eating Disorders

Families and friends have told us over and over again that they need a combination of information, respect, and hope. In that spirit, we say as honestly and authoritatively as we can: At the moment, there is no getting around 3 scary facts:

1. Eating disorders are very serious, sometimes debilitating, and (at times) deadly disorders.^{1,2,3}
2. Not everyone recovers, particularly if they have been ill for a long time and if their illness is compounded by severe depression, coexisting alcohol and substance abuse, severe obsessionality, and/or severe personality problems such as emotional instability and behavioral impulsivity.^{4,3}
3. Surprisingly little is known for certain about the course and prognosis of eating disorders, and about which treatments will be best for which individuals.

That said, we can also say honestly, that, based on the current outcome research, and based on our own extensive experience as therapists, the following generalizations apply—and are cause for realistic, productive hope.^{1,4,3,5,6}

1. Approximately 50-70% of people with eating disorders recover significantly if not fully.
2. Recovery may proceed very rapidly, but often requires 3-7 years
3. Approximately 20-30% of people with eating disorders improve to a significant degree but never fully recover. They are still haunted and limited by weight and shape concerns, anxieties about eating and exercising, and depression.
4. Approximately 5-15% of people suffering from eating disorders remain quite ill and can be said to have a chronic and debilitating psychiatric disorder.

There is a high probability that your loved one will feel worse before they feel better IF they are actively involved in treatment and trying to move through the eating disorder symptoms.^{1,5}

Reducing the symptoms of eating disorders may create more cognitive and emotional distress, which may be taken out on the family members.

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- 1 Herrin, M., & Matsumoto, N. (2007). *The parent's guide to eating disorders: Supporting self-esteem, healthy eating, & positive body image at home* (2nd ed.). Carlsbad, CA: Gürze.
 - 2 Kaplan, A. S., & Garfinkel, P. E. (Eds.). (1983). *Medical issues and the eating disorders: The interface*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
 - 3 Steinhausen, H-C. (2002). The outcome of anorexia nervosa in the 20th century. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 154, 313-321.
 - 4 Keel, P. K., & Mitchell, J. E. (1997). Outcome in bulimia nervosa. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 154, 313-321.
 - 5 Treasure, J. (1997). *Anorexia nervosa: A survival guide for families, friends and sufferers*. East Sussex, UK: Psychology Press.
 - 6 Vrabel, K. R., Rosenvinge, J. H., Hoffart, A., Martinsen, E.W., & Ro, O. (2008). The course of illness following inpatient treatment of adults with longstanding eating disorders: A 5-year follow-up. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. 41, 224-232.

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